

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001: REMEMBER FORGETTING*

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ABSTRACT

In *History, Memory, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur speaks about the paradox of memory that appears as “an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory—and of forgetting.” In this essay, I reflect on this paradox and, in particular, on what needs to be forgotten in popular imaginaries as the very condition for commemorating it. My intent is to show how dominant narratives about “9/11” enable abuses of memory and what is lost in the process. Although I don’t offer a determinate conclusion, my point is to suggest that what we lose is a fuller awareness of ourselves and others.

Keywords: abuses of forgetting; abuses of memory; Chile’s 9/11; Christian theology; Islamic theology.

* The title is an homage to St. Augustine’s dictum in Book X of his *Confessions* (St. Augustine, *Confessions* [London: Penguin, 1961], 222), quoted in Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 30. I am grateful to Ulises Mejias for his careful reading of and comments on this essay.

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In *History, Memory, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur speaks of “an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory—and of forgetting.”² On the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, I want to reflect on this paradox, in particular, on what needs to be forgotten in popular imaginaries as the very condition for commemorating it. To this end, I re-visit some dominant narratives about “9/11” with the intent of illustrating how abuses of memory occur and also what is lost in the process. The conclusion towards which I build is that what we lose is a fuller awareness of ourselves and others.

First, however, I want to clarify that by abuses of memory Ricoeur means “a concerted manipulation of memory and of forgetting by those who hold power.”³ This happens when ideology “insinuates itself between the demand for identity and the public expressions of memory.” This intervention remains hidden, though, since ideology masks and inverts itself, “denouncing its adversaries...for it is always the other who stoops to ideology.”⁴ It is also ideology that mobilizes the narratives that, from the start, enable “forgetting as much as...remembering.”⁵ This is why an abuse of memory is also an abuse of forgetting, because “strategies of forgetting are directly grafted onto [this narrative configuration].” After all, says Ricoeur, “one can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action.”⁶ Hence the need to ask, “Of what are there memories? Whose memory is it?”⁷

Although it is power that ideologizes memory and sustains the hegemony of “imposed, celebrated, commemorated” histories, Ricoeur also discerns “a secret complicity” on people’s part in “forgetting by avoidance.” He believes this “expression of bad faith and its strategy of evasion [are] motivated by an obscure will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen’s environment, in short by a wanting-not-to-know” attitude.⁸ Individual and collective memories thus collude in forgetting.

Lastly, according to Ricoeur, abuses of memory can happen “under the auspices of the search for justice.” This is especially so when one “proclaim[s] oneself a victim and endlessly...demand[s] reparation” since such a stance “engenders an exorbitant privilege, which places everyone

2. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), xv.

3. Ibid., 80.

4. Ibid., 82.

5. Ibid., 85.

6. Ibid., 448.

7. Ibid., 3.

8. Ibid., 448–49.

else in the position of owing a debt.”⁹ This doesn’t mean that there are no victims, however, or that we should not recognize them. To the contrary, Ricoeur argues that “the moral priority belongs to victims,” but only to those “other than ourselves.” In fact, in his view, “the duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self.”¹⁰

This is, of course, a very abbreviated and partial outline of Ricoeur’s argument and I offer it not because I can explore all its elements but as a way to define the conceptual parameters within which I want to ask some questions about 9/11.

Why “9/11”?

The first is, why do we call the attacks of September 11, 2001 against the US “9/11?” Why is 9/11, a date that had remained anonymous and innocuous until 2001, now inextricably linked to a US tragedy? This may seem like an absurd question given that, as Ricoeur says, “among all the ‘things’ we remember...the ‘thing’ remembered is plainly identified with a singular, unrepeatable event.”¹¹ Clearly, “9/11” has become that singular and unrepeatable event in the consciousness not only of the US but of the rest of the world as well. However, if 9/11 is what happened “to” the US in 2001, then how is one to speak about the 9/11 of the US’s making in Chile in 1973? The CIA-instigated coup against Salvador Allende, its democratically elected president, brought about not only his own death but also the deaths of thousands of Chileans who were murdered by the subsequent military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.¹² It was, in effect, a 9/11 that kept on killing for a generation.

Writing about this 9/11 in the wake of the attacks on the US in 2001, the noted Chilean playwright, Ariel Dorfman, recalled that,

During the past 28 years, 11 September has been a date of mourning, for me and millions of others, ever since that Tuesday in 1973 when Chile lost its democracy in a military coup, that day when death irrevocably entered our lives and changed us forever. And now, almost three decades later, the malignant gods of random history have wanted to impose upon the same country that we blamed for the coup that dreadful date, again a Tuesday, again an 11 September filled with death.¹³

9. Ibid., 86.

10. Ibid., 89.

11. Ibid., 23.

12. Without US support, Pinochet could not have come to power, which is why I speak of US violence against Chile, even if it was enacted on behalf of or through Chilean intermediaries.

13. Ariel Dorfman, “America’s No Longer Unique,” *Counterpunch*, October 3, 2001, <http://www.counterpunch.org/dorfman.html>.

History's gods, if it has any, may well be malicious but there is more than a random likeness between the two 9/11s. While the number of immediate casualties in both differed, in both, "terror descended from the sky to destroy the symbols of national identity"; in both, people were shocked that such violence could be aimed at "us"; in both, it produced a loss of innocence, "a parallel suffering, a similar pain, a commensurate disorientation."¹⁴ Why, then, is only one event known as "9/11"? Why is Chile's 9/11 not 9/11? Is one 9/11 more singular or unrepeatable than the other? Indeed, are singularity and unrepeatability the only reasons for the excess of memory around the US's "9/11" and an excess of forgetting around Chile's? Is one tragedy more worth remembering than the other? Why not commemorate them *both*?¹⁵

It is not the point of Dorfman's essay to address such questions, at least directly, but it holds some clues as to possible answers. One has to do with the global status of the US. As he presciently noted, the fact that "the most powerful nation on Earth" had been attacked "has and will have consequences which affect all humanity. Whereas very few of the six billion people alive today could remember or would be able to identify what happened in Chile."¹⁶ The history whose randomness Dorfman laments, bears him out to a letter. The Chileans were left to mourn their dead and disappeared in silence for decades and without reparations from the US. Not only did the victims of *that* 9/11 enjoy no moral priority but the US has never recognized them as victims because to do so would be to admit the injustice of its own policies.

In contrast, the 2001 attacks on the US unleashed the "shock and awe" tactics of total war against millions of Muslims, the vast majority of whom had no hand in the attacks. Thousands of civilian casualties of these wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other states, are being written off as the "collateral damage" of the US's quest for justice. Even if its wars haven't engulfed all of humanity, the US's "anti-terror" measures have, giving governments everywhere a free hand to persecute their opponents by labeling them terrorists. Is it *possible* to forget "9/11" under such circumstances?

This is not to say that war alone has seared "9/11" into public memories or that war is the only manifestation of US power. So, too, is the way in which the well-being and pathologies, successes and failures, dreams and ambitions, stories and sagas of US Americans upstage and upend those of all others in the world arena. If their tragedies also become the world's

14. Ibid.

15. I mean at a global level since, in Chile, they must already.

16. Ibid.

tragedies and seem more deserving of our sympathies, even if they are no more tragic than others, it is also because of this calculus of symbolic privilege that accrues to the US. Is that not why it has been able to appropriate not just a date in history for itself but history itself so that 9/11 can only signify the violence done to the US but not the violence done by the US to Chile?

There is another reason for the excess of memory around the US's "9/11" and an excess of forgetting around Chile's, especially within the US itself, and this has to do with the US's convictional belief in its own exceptionalism. As God's chosen "city upon a hill," it sees itself as not just unique but also as being set apart from the rest of the world for which it is nonetheless a beacon. Whatever befalls it is therefore seen to be of universal significance. Yet, to be born here, or even to live here for any length of time, is to experience the US as a universe unto itself, disconnected from the world. And when the world *does* intrude on people's consciousness, it is usually "in the form of wars, natural disasters, and tales of horrific destitution. Between the violence and the charity that such representations inspire, there is little room for cultivating relationships with others based in mutual recognition or understanding."¹⁷

Earlier, I asked why we don't commemorate *both* 9/11s, and I believe this is because it would require the US not only to acknowledge its own 9/11 against Chile, but also to engage in this process of mutual recognition. To put it in Dorfman's words, it would mean having to "look into the mirror of our common humanity." He argues that the trauma of 2001 opened up an opportunity for US citizens to do that, by identifying with those "other human beings who, in faraway zones, have suffered similar situations of unanticipated and often protracted injury and fury,"¹⁸ often at the hands of the US itself, I might add. But what we saw instead was a retreat into exceptionalism, "that attitude which allowed...[them] to imagine themselves as beyond the sorrows and calamities that have plagued less fortunate peoples around the world."¹⁹

US Americans are, of course, free to live their illusions and to mourn their tragedies as they wish but putting Chile's 9/11 out of our minds requires collective complicity. This "forgetting by avoidance" is built into the very term "9/11" which, by taking the attacks on the US as its only reference, leaves no room for its Chilean *doppelganger*. Does this not mean that memory has failed in its ethical duty to others?

17. Asma Barlas, "9/11, the Academy, and Renewal," unpublished talk, September 12, 2002.

18. Dorfman, "America's No Longer Unique."

19. Ibid.

Where are Muslim Politics and Christian Theology?

If pushing Chile's 9/11 down a memory-hole is an example of avoidance, so, too, is the US's attempt to delink the 2001 attacks from its own policies. Even proposing such a connection is seen as treasonous but, once again, it is instructive to contrast official explanations of the two 9/11s. In Chile's case, the US claimed the right to secure its own "backyard" against what it saw as a possible Soviet proxy. In its logic, had the Chileans not voted the Marxist Allende to their country's presidency, the US also would not have attacked Chile. In other words, the Chileans were to blame for their 9/11, a view that is consonant with the US's refusal to see its victims as victims. However, in its own case, the US has stubbornly denied that its "9/11" might have been a response to its foreign policies, especially its extensive and unilateral violence against others. So lawless has this violence been that the US is the only country to have been censured by the International Court of Justice "for international terrorism—for 'the unlawful use of force' for political ends" and ordered it to end its "crimes and pay substantial reparations."²⁰ More to the point, given the subject of this essay, Osama bin Laden, the reputed mastermind of 9/11, explicitly drew attention to US policies in 1998. "In today's wars," he said,

there are no morals, and it is clear that mankind has descended to the lowest degrees of decadence and oppression. They rip us of our wealth and of our resources and of our oil. Our religion is under attack. They kill and murder our brothers. They compromise our honor and our dignity and dare we utter a single word of protest against the injustice, we are called terrorists. This is compounded injustice. And the United Nations insistence to convict the victims and support the aggressors constitutes a serious precedence which shows the extent of injustice that has been allowed to take root in this land.²¹

One does not need to agree with bin Laden in order to see the significance of his critique to the 2001 attacks which are alleged to have been executed by his disciples. However, such passages have never figured in US explanations of 9/11, and they slipped out of public memories almost immediately. It could be because they not only implicated the US in the injustices bin Laden was condemning but also because they called into question his own portrayals as a religious fanatic without a cause against the US. Moreover, they served to place the 2001 attacks squarely within the arena of politics by emphasizing political, economic, and ideological grievances.

20. This judgment pertains to Nicaragua's case against the US in 1984. Cf. Noam Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 84.

21. Frontline, Interview, "Who is Bin Laden?" http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview_.html#ixzz1Sq0KF6gh

In the end, of course, US people chose to embrace a picture of bin Laden that fit into a larger one with which they were already intimately familiar: of the “dangerous sickness, madness, and derangement of Arabs and Muslims.”²² To admit that the 2001 attacks might have had to do with politics, whether of the US or of the hijackers, would have meant relinquishing the ideological investment in the notion of Muslim pathology. Only once did an explanation, the very first one, by then US president, George W. Bush, manage to reconcile Muslim politics with pathology. Consider his stupefying tautology, “Why do they hate us?": because they “hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”²³ (By this token, the Chileans could also claim that the US attacked them because it hated their “freedom to vote,” etcetera which would contain some truth.) In sum, hatred of US domestic politics (civil and political rights) and not the unjust nature of US foreign policies had brought about the attacks on it.

In spite of its ideological appeal, however, this explanation was presently eclipsed by another that attributed a generalized Muslim hatred towards the US to Islamic theology. The attacks were recast as a “holy war,” or jihad, a depiction that persists until today in spite of the sizeable literature that points out that the concept of holy war has its roots in the Hebrew Bible, not in Islam’s scripture, the Qur’an. Indeed, not only is there no holy war concept in Islam, but the Qur’an also does not use the word jihad for violence or advocate unprovoked violence against others, or refer to Jews or Christians as infidels.²⁴ Yet, some of the same distortions that began to circulate in the Western media soon after 2001 are still around a decade later.

In fact, many of these distortions have been around since the Middle Ages, as the historian Robert Southern demonstrates. He argues that it was the “strong desire not to know for fear of contamination [that] made the existence of Islam the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom.”²⁵ And when medieval Christians did try to understand Islam, they turned to the Bible, which is why they came to read into it the

22. Edward Said, “The Clash of Definitions,” in *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, ed. Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 68–87 (70–71).

23. Quoted in David Rieff, “After 9/11: The Limits of Remembrance,” *Harpers*, August 2011, 47.

24. See Asma Barlas, “Jihad=Holy War=Terrorism,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 20, no. 1 (2003): 46–62.

25. R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 3.

“signs of a sinister conspiracy against Christianity,” and even “that total negation of it...which would mark the contrivances of Antichrist.”²⁶ In fact, even some later Christian theologians, like Martin Luther, continued to anathematize the Prophet as an Antichrist. It is not hard to see this image lurking beneath his current depictions as a terrorist as well. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁷ the figure of the terrorist is a secular gloss on the Antichrist, and both images perform the same function in Western ideology, which is to position Islam as the West’s antithesis.

Southern also notes that contact with Muslims did not end Christian ignorance about Islam. They continued to take “legends and fantasies... to represent a more or less truthful account” of it and these fables did not change much “from generation to generation.”²⁸ Although some of these have now vanished from conscious memory, the ideological template, the “mirror of difference,”²⁹ as I call it, within which the West continues to define Islam, carries the unmistakable imprint of Christianity. Yet, for some reason, this imprint remains invisible to Westerners.

Meanwhile, even though the rhetoric about the “war on terror” has been toned down by the administration of US president Barack Obama, the conflation of jihad with holy war, and of “terrorists” with “jihadists” remains in place. In fact, by now the word terrorist has been so thoroughly Islamized that any Muslim who commits any violence for any reason anywhere is routinely labeled a “jihadist” or an “Islamist.” At the same time, the violence Muslims do counts as terrorism,³⁰ while the terror others do is called a war, or extremism or, as in the case of the recent Oslo massacre by a Christian man, a “rise in right-wing sentiment.”³¹ This in spite of the fact that the man himself admits that he wanted to instigate a European “anti-Muslim Crusade.”³²

26. Ibid., 25.

27. Asma Barlas, “Would Spinoza Understand Me? Europe, Islam, and the Mirror of Difference,” in Asma Barlas, *Re-understanding Islam: A Double Critique* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum Press, 2008).

28. Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, 14, 28–29.

29. Barlas, “Would Spinoza Understand Me?,” 33.

30. Glenn Greenwald, “The Omnipotence of Al Qaeda and Meaninglessness of ‘Terrorism,’” *Salon*, July 23, 2011. http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2011/07/23/nyt/index.html?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=pulsenews

31. Nicolas Kulich, “Norway Attacks Put Spotlight on Rise of Right-Wing Sentiment in Europe,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/world/europe/24europe.html?expprod=myyahoo>

32. Bjoern Amland, “Lawyer: Norway Suspect Wanted Anti-Muslim Crusade,” Associated Press, July 24, 2011. <http://news.yahoo.com/lawyer-norway-suspect-wanted-anti-muslim-crusade-115344430.html>

These are all instances of recounting differently, by shifting the focus and recasting people and events in a different light and they are also abuses of forgetting because missing from official narratives is any reference to the role of Christian theology and history in having shaped Western views of Islam.

In Ending

In a recent essay, David Rieff argues that it may be time to start questioning “what collective memory of the kind that is being expressed in the tenth-anniversary commemorations of 9/11 is actually good for, and what are its risks.” He notes that remembrance has a “moral downside” and that it is always political. In his words, “the ghost at the banquet of all public commemoration is always politics—above all, the mobilization of national solidarity.”³³ Instead of conjuring up this ghost in order to nurse a permanent or exceptional sense of injury, he suggests it might be better to consider the “morally or psychologically unpalatable possibility that at some times and in some contexts forgetting may actually be preferable to remembering.”³⁴

Forgetting as a way to stop privileging one’s own wounded memories is one way for the US to transcend its obsessive self-regard. Another is by remembering its own wounding of others (Chile), or the mutuality of wounding (Christians and Muslims). However, exceptionalizing 9/11 closes down such a possibility. If anything, by describing the present in terms of a “post 9/11,” it makes all our futures hostage to the US’s past and to its memories of that past. This leaves no room for US Americans to recognize the moral priority of others and nor, indeed, to know themselves fully since it precludes the possibility of mutual recognition.

Perhaps on this 9/11/2011, we—those of us who were born in the US and those who simply live here—could learn from some introspection. There are those who, remarks St. Augustine, “go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty billows of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the compass of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, and pass themselves by.”³⁵ What if memory didn’t allow us to pass ourselves by?

33. Rieff, “After 9/11,” 47.

34. Ibid., 50.

35. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XIII, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo

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